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On German Knights in Denmark during the reign of Valdemar Atterdag 1340-1375

The Outsiders

German nobility in 14th century Denmark has traditionally been viewed in nationalistic light. The influx of German nobles during the reigns of Eric Menved and Christopher II, as well as during the following period of Holsatian domination has been seen as a national disaster, from which the nation recovered during the reign of Valdemar IV. The German nobles have been seen as strangers, opposed to the native nobility, and whose influence and ties to the kingdom of Denmark were only temporary. Hence they have, apart from a few leading men, largely been treated as an anonymous mass.¹

In later studies the German nobility has received a more nuanced treatment. Michael Linton's and Niels Bracke's respective dissertations on Queen Margrethes and Valdemar IV reigns both address the immigration of German nobility and evaluate to a certain extent the emerging ties between the native and immigrated nobles. Due to the focus on royal administration – and rather scarce sources - both center on a few powerful families.²

The German immigration and integration of all families has been studied by Esben Albrechtsen and H.V. Gregersen, but only within the boundaries of Southern Jutland.³ Even though the Germans have been studied as single families and as a group in the context of Southern Jutland, there seems to be a lack of an overview of the group in the whole kingdom of Denmark.

Object and limitations of this study

In this paper I shall discuss German chivalry in Denmark between the years 1340 and 1375, during the reign of Valdemar IV aka Atterdag. I survey German knights with emphasis on the men under royal lordship. I have concentrated on the knights as an aristocratic group, leaving out the military and the courtly aspects of chivalry. The period I study is relatively short in order to enable the entire group to be viewed.

As my main source I have used the *Diplomatarium Danicum*-series, parts III, 1 to III, 10, in which practically all the documents pertinent to Danish history of the period have been published. With systematic analysis of the material I have mapped how large a group the German knights formed and have tried to analyse their position in the ruling elite of the kingdom of Denmark.

The composition and size of the studied group

The German knights in Denmark had rather varied backgrounds. Some were descendants of nobles who had immigrated already in late 13th century, and who by now may have been totally integrated to Danish nobility. A large number were connected to the counts of Holstein, who had acquired large Danish domains in the early 14th century, especially in the 1320s. And thirdly, King Valdemar IV attracted to his service individual knights from all over northern Germany.

It is impossible to give very accurate numbers on Danish nobility at any given point before the 16th century.⁴ In the 14th century the sources are so scattered – even among the knights, who by this time were increasingly forming an elite set apart from more rustic gentry by their dubbing – that it is unlikely that everyone is mentioned.⁵ The numbers I present on German knights are based on the same incomplete material and should not be seen as absolute figures. Rather, they form a basis for rough estimates and comparisons.

In *Diplomatarium Danicum* parts III, 1 - 10, there are to be found around 300 knights who have not been given an ethnic attribute by the editors and who were alive, or probably alive, during the period 1340-1375. From the context it can be seen that they appeared in Denmark.⁶ In the same sources 65 knights of foreign birth and connected to king Valdemar IV appear. That is, these men appear in treaties as members of the king's party, as his witnesses and signatories and sometimes as paid members of his retinue. The majority of these are included in the rough total of 300 knights, but not all.⁷ They thus form a sizeable minority of approximately one fifth.

Apart from the foreign knights in royal service there were knights serving dukes of Schlesvig and the counts of Holstein who should be accounted for. The group of knights in the service of the dukes Valdemar and Henry is altogether rather insignificant – only twelve appear in all the letters issued by the dukes between 1340-1375. Three of these also served the king at other times. The group includes five men whose families were from Holstein. These men are all included in the total of about 300.⁸

The knights serving the counts of Holstein are a much larger group. The same material of the *Diplomatarium Danicum* mentions 54 knights its editors have defined as Holsatians.⁹ The group is only slightly smaller than the group serving the king. How many of these had close connection with Denmark proper, however, is open to question. Some did – serving their masters in Seeland, Funen and other areas under Holsatian influence.

There is some overlap between the different groups. Men who changed their affiliation from the counts of Holstein to become knights of the king form one of the clearest trends. Only five men did the transition as documentable knights.¹⁰ Ten – who appear first in the service of the counts of Holstein - are mentioned as knights only after they have gone over to the service of king Valdemar.¹¹ At least seven more had family connections to those in Holsatian service even though there is no evidence of them personally serving the Counts.¹² These 22 form the largest single group of foreign knights in Valdemar IV service. Others from among the king's knights came from varied backgrounds, with those of Pomeranian ancestry forming the largest group followed by those connected to Mecklenburg and Brunswick.¹³ With the overlap between different groups taken into account the total number of knights becomes 118. Since all the Holsatian men cannot be connected directly with Denmark proper the number of foreign knights active in Denmark between 1340-1375 must be estimated somewhat lower, the true number probably lying between 80 and 100.

The time of immigration varied as much as the place from where the knights emigrated. For some the German roots have already been two or three generations old by 1340 -1375.¹⁴ On the other hand, the group also includes first generation immigrants, who had arrived after 1340. These include among others one of the most influential men of the period, Henning Podebusk from Rügen.

Integration into Danish power structures

The integration of German knights into Danish power structures is a multifaceted question. On one hand it is a question of being employed by princely authority and being delegated royal powers. On the other hand it is a question of acquiring control of land and gaining entrance to noble networks of mutual support, of having and cultivating an independent power base.

During the reign of Valdemar IV there were several competing centres of power in Denmark. The most powerful – and growing in influence throughout the period - was royal authority. From a meagre start in 1340 it expanded its territorial sphere of influence through most of Valdemars reign. The

counts of Holstein formed a second, competing centre of territorial authority. Their territorial power base in Denmark was diminishing due to the royal redemption of mortgages and reconquest. The third authority was the dukes of Schleswig whose influence was eclipsed by both royal and comital power.¹⁵

Apart from these territorial princes the nobles themselves had considerable power – partly due to their own allodial landed property but also through control of mortgaged royal domains and fiefs. Besides income these granted their holders administrative and military powers. Through networks of alliances, family and marital ties nobles would try to enhance their individual status and also employ their power in a collective manner.

Knights of foreign lineage had a strong presence in the royal administration before 1341 all the key offices - marshal, seneschal and the chancellor - were occupied by men sent by the king's German allies. Their masters called most of these men back after May 1341.¹⁶ Of these individuals, only the marshal, Friederich von Lochen, continued to serve the Danish king again after 1355.¹⁷ New men appeared after 1341, but even among these those of foreign ancestry were strongly present: the long time seneschal Claus Limbæk, the chamberlain Evert Moltke, prefect of Scania Fikke Moltke and Henning Podebusk, first prefect of Scania and later seneschal, were all German.¹⁸

Foreigners were also present in the council of state. A short overview of some key documents from 1360 onwards showed that at least 20 of the 65 foreign knights serving Valdemar Atterdag were at some point referred to formally as councillors of the king. Informally, by merely appearing as signatories of the king, the number would be larger. Besides knights some powerful German squires were also members. The German men are roughly equal in numbers to the native Danish members of the council.¹⁹

The foreign influence was also marked in the control of the royal castles, which had both administrative and military significance. According to the frequently quoted calculations of Erik Arup over half of all the known castle captains in the 1360s were German. Throughout the whole period the Germans were not quite as numerous, but were still strongly represented.²⁰ Germans were thus firmly present in the military administration of Valdemar IV's realm.

An argument has been made that Valdemar IV used Germans and Danish nobles of lesser status since they lacked the connections to noble networks.²¹ Owing their position solely to the king and lacking

powerful family support they would have been forced to loyalty. This argument requires that one define foreigners rather narrowly; the networks of German and Danish nobility overlap to a certain extent.

For the majority of German knights in Denmark family connections remain largely unknown.²² (In this respect the Germans are not different from the Danish.²³) For the rest information is mostly incomplete, but something may be observed of the leading families.

Of those whose family had resided in the kingdom of Denmark for one or two generations the leading men seem to have been able to integrate rather seamlessly into existing noble networks. The former castle captain of the counts of Holstein, Claus v. Limbæk demonstrated this in a most spectacular way. Bound with family ties to leading Jutish noble families, serving in the highest secular office of the realm yet repeatedly acting as one of the leaders of the Jutish nobility in its rebellions, his repeated returns to office bear witness both to his personal power and the collective power of the Jutish nobles.²⁴

Yet some of the king's most loyal servants – the Moltkes and Henning Podebusk – had been able to marry their sons into some of the leading Danish noble families.²⁵ It is interesting to note that these connections are mainly to families with their origins in Seeland, and who had also gained their prominence through royal favour.

Apart from the Danish connections the newcomers retained connections to their German relatives and possessions. Michael Linton has seen this as a planned family strategy.²⁶ The resulting ties could be used for the benefit of a noble's master, as in 1362 when Fikke Moltke negotiated truce with the Hanse in Rostock and used his relatives and friends in Mecklenburg as guarantors.²⁷ On the other hand too close ties to subjects of potential enemies could entice to changing sides.²⁸

Knowledge of the landed property of German knights during this period is fragmentary. (As is knowledge of all noble domains outside Seeland.)²⁹ For about one third of the foreign knights serving Valdemar IV there is some indication of Danish landed property during our period. The group of whose Danish property there is no information on is as large or slightly larger. Even Henning Podebusk, the man who held the highest power in realm during the king's absence in 1368-1372, belongs to this group.³⁰

Even where evidence of domains has survived it is usually incomplete; at best central manors and castles are known, the total extent of domains is practically never given.³¹ What seems clear is that

several of the immigrating families could amass remarkable domains.³² Linton has argued that especially the nobility of Holstein had access to a large amount of capital, which allowed them to gather large domains in a short period of time.³³ Erik Ulsig on the other hand has stressed the difficulties in consolidating such domains. The rapid dissolution of apparently large domains of family Moltke from 1380s onwards would indicate that the Moltkes would have either have only held partial shares in their many manors or held them through mortgages.³⁴

Landed property, whether allodial, mortgaged or held as a fief from the king, formed one of the bases of social prestige for the nobility. To a certain extent it shaped and determined the natural networks of loyalty. The recruitment area for royal service was predominantly the area under royal control. Through analysis of the king's witnesses Erik Ulsig has found that for the early reign of Valdemar IV, up to 1343, the arrival of new signatories correlates directly with the spread of royal territory.³⁵ This is formally evident in treaties transferring the fealty of castle captains in redeemed areas.³⁶ It explains the recruitment of at least part of king Valdemar's Holsatian servants and helps to explain further the Jutish sympathies of the Ahlefeldts and Limbæks.

Territorial ties were not the only determining factor. Firstly men could have interests and holdings in several princes' spheres of lordship, especially in the 1340s. In the making of peace between the King and the counts of Holstein in 1353 it had to be specifically agreed that the servants of the king would be allowed to enjoy their possessions in Holstein unhindered.³⁷ Even though an agreement was made, the fact that it was felt to be necessary may be seen as the symptom of a trend towards defining authority through territory, where multiple loyalties were becoming ever more anomalous.

Secondly, a lack of territorial interests and holdings would have made it desirable to seek a new master. The career of Henning Podebusk might be an example of such a move, though he did have a share in the family property in Rügen. The way the majority of king Valdemar's Holsatian servants received their accolade after becoming royal servants would, in my opinion, suggest that these men for the most part had not had significant territorial possessions or well established positions in the service of the counts.

The Danish reaction?

How did the Danish nobility react to the newcomers? There have been speculations that the influx of Germans would have led to occasional violent clashes between the native nobility and the immigrants. Solid evidence for this seems to be lacking though.³⁸

It seems that the process of immigration was mainly peaceful. Between the leading families of Jutish and Holsatian nobility marriage alliances seem to have been rather normal occurrences. Also the leading men of Valdemar Atterdag had been able to get their sons married into rich families. These families have apparently found such ties useful.

The nobility of Jutland rebelled against Valdemar IV on several occasions. The sources are not very clear on their exact motives. Practically only one contemporary and local source, the Younger Chronicle of Seeland, tells that in 1359 the Jutes refused to take the increasing burdens of royal works onto themselves, like the people of Seeland.³⁹ Apart from this case, the rebellions are seen mainly as personal clashes between the king and the Jutish leaders.⁴⁰ In contrast to the 1320s there is no hint that the resentment of foreigners would be among the motives of the rebels. Quite the contrary – some of the rebels themselves were of foreign ancestry and the rebels seem to have had no scruples against allying with foreign princes.⁴¹

The presence of Germans as castle captains and in the council was against the *handfastnings* of 1320 and 1326.⁴² There are no comments against this either in the tractate of 1354 from or the 1360 land peace ordinance, even though the king in both cases pledged to respect old privileges.⁴³ Even though the nobles attempted to limit the royal powers after the death of Valdemar IV there was no attempt at denying the Germans these posts in the *handfastning* of king Oluf in 1376.⁴⁴ The native nobility seems to have accepted, or been forced to accept, German participation in administration.

Conclusions

How did the German knights fare when compared to those with native ancestry? The number of knights living or actively serving in Denmark between 1340 and 1375 could be approximated to between 300 and 320. This estimate includes between 80 and 100 foreign knights, 65 knights serving the Danish king, to which can be added the somewhat smaller groups of knights serving the counts of Holstein and the dukes of Schlesvig in Denmark. Very roughly one might estimate that between one quarter and one third of the knights in Denmark at the time were of German origin.

The German knights, with their status as knights and royal councillors, belong to the highest divisions of nobility as defined by Troels Dahlerup: magnates and nobles.⁴⁵ Lack of evidence prevents for the most part evaluating whether they had property that corresponded with this status. According to Ulsig the newcomers could not compete in allodial property with native nobility whose domains had been gathered through generations.⁴⁶ On the other hand at least some of the newcomers could gather remarkable domains – even though only parts of them may have been allodial.

The German knights seem to have had a stronger presence in royal administration than their numbers alone would justify. Together with their apparent lack of stable landed property this might indicate that the Germans were more likely to be dubbed knights on account of long service than members of the native nobility. To acquire conclusive results on this, however, further studies into the individual careers of both German and Danish knights would be needed.

The marriage ties that bound members of the families Moltke, Podebusk, Limbæk and Ahlefeldt to some of the greatest land-owning families in Denmark might indicate that their landed possessions were comparable to the native magnates' possessions. It clearly suggests that they achieved social parity with the leading Danish nobles. At the same time they illustrate the networks formed between German and Danish nobility on its top level.

The German knights formed a heterogeneous group both in their origins and their fortunes. The leading families illustrate what they could aspire to, but leave open the question how well the average German knight fared socially and economically.

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- Ulsig Erik, Adel og Konge. In Ingesman, Per & Jensen, Jens Villiam (ed.) 2001. pp.78-104.

Notes

- ¹ Arup 1932, p. 109; Christensen 1945, pp. 100-110; Ulsig 1968, 188-191; Ulsig 1999, 3637; Bøgh 1999, 36-37.
- ² Michael Linton, *Drottning Margareta fullmäktig fru och rätt busbonde*, 1971; Niels Bracke: *Die Regierung Waldemars IV*. 1999
- ³ Esbern Albrechtsen, *Herredømmet over Sønderjylland 1375-1404*, 1981; H.V. Gregersen: *Plattysk I Sønderjylland*.
- ⁴ Dahlerup 2001, p. 19; Prange 2001, p. 40 In this article Prange has evaluated different approximations on number of families, but points to incompleteness of written sources.
- ⁵ Prange 1988, p. 195, gives a good example of deficiencies in the sources. *Dominus* Hinric Plot is not mentioned in any written source. His name and coat of arms survive only through a stained glass window from Døllefjerde church.
- ⁶ 302 – 15 (only) mentioned to be dead before 1349, 20 mentioned only being dead, but after 1350. This number includes knights in Scania, although the province was under Swedish lordship until 1360. This number includes those of foreign birth who were not directly connected to some foreign prince like the counts of Holstein. I have pruned out those with no connection to Denmark, for example some relatives of the powerful Henning Pødebusk who seem never to have left his native Rügen.
- ⁷ Family connections have been defined mainly with the help of Anders Thiset: *Nyt Dansk Adelslexikon*. Kjøbenhavn 1904. I have also counted as foreigners those whose ancestry, according to Thiset, points to Southern Jutland, namely members of the families Ahlefeld, Limbæk, Kalf, Urne and Staverskov.
- ⁸ The rest were of families who first appeared in Southern Jutland, which may hide German ancestry.
- ⁹ 54 – most have similar relationships to the counts as the king's men have to the king. The group does, however, include at least one knight, Machorius Brusehaver, who as a knight only appears in fealty to the Danish king.
- ¹⁰ Timme Godendorp 1348, Henrik Spliet between 1348 and 1353, Hartvig Krummedige between 1351 and 1353, Timme Meinerstorp between 1359 and 1373.
- ¹¹ Benedict Ahlefeld, Hartvig Breyde, Henning Meinerstorp, Johan Hummersbüttel, Kersten Kule, Klaus Limbæk, Lyder Limbæk, Lydeke Skinkel Kune, Machorius Brusehaver, Markward Groper.
- ¹² Eler Porsfeld, Lyder Kale, Detlev v. Siggem, Klaus Kudy Limbæk, Henning Meinerstorp, and Henneke Limbæk. This includes families defined by Thiset as Southern Jutish.
- ¹³ 10 From Pomerania, 7 from Mecklenburg, 5 from Brunswick, 3 from Saxony, 2 each from Brandenburg and Württemberg, and 10 of unknown origins.
- ¹⁴ Four of the five from Brunswickians were from a junior branch of the family of the counts of Eberstein and at this stage rather isolated from their German relatives. The Pomeranians were dominated by members of different branches of the Moltke family. Members of both these families had already come to the country before the 1320s.
- ¹⁵ The fact that before 1360 Scania was part of the Swedish king's realm has been ignored here.
- ¹⁶ A crisis in Germany required the Wittelsbach allies of Valdemar IV to recall the men they had sent. Tägil 1962, p. 103-104; Ulsig 1985, p. 266-267.
- ¹⁷ 1355, *Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III*. 4, 259.
- ¹⁸ The term seneschal is here used for *drots* or *dapifer*, chamberlain for *kammerræster* or *camerarius* and prefect for *gælker*.
- ¹⁹ 1369, *Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III*. 8, 369: 26 royal signatories, the ratio of Germans to Danes was 13/13; also in 1369 *Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III*. 8, 370: the ratio was 7/9; and the same year *Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III*. 8, 371: the ratio was 13/12; in 1370 *Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III*. 8, 450: the ratio was 12/15. The absence of the rebelling Jutish nobility may skew the statistics.
- ²⁰ Arup 1932, p. 109. Of the 70 castle captains mentioned in *Diplomatarium Danicum III* 23 were foreigners. Bracke 1999, p. 109.

²¹ Arup 1932, p. 109; Christensen 1945, pp. 190-191; Ulsig 1985, p. 270; Bracke 1999, p. 108-110.

²² The papers from between 1340 and 1375 contain no information on the families of 45 of the 65 knights with foreign origin serving Valdemar IV.

²³ Prange 1988, pp. 192-195, passim.

²⁴ Connected with marriage to the family of Stig Andersen Hvide in 1363 (*Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III. 6, 166*), and also through his daughters marriage to Ivar Nielsen (Rosencrantz). He took part in all three Jutish rebellions, and was the rebels' spokesman when peace was made in 1360 (*Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III. 5, 289*). Bracke has argued that Claus Limbæks repeated returns were the king's appeasement of Jutish nobility. Bracke 1999, pp. 49-55, 62-63. Compare Ulsig 2001, p. 100. (As visible symbol of his might Claus Limbæk held the important castle of Kalø.)

²⁵ Ulsig 1968, pp. 173-181. The Moltkes had connections both to the families Lunge and Falk. The sons of Henning Podebusk had ties both to the Vendelbo and Skarsholm families.

²⁶ Linton 1971, pp. 187-190. The best examples would be the families Podebusk and Moltke whose Danish members took active part in administering their possessions in Rügen and Pomerania.

²⁷ *Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III. 6, 244*. There are other examples from the treaty of Nebbe in 1348, where the fealty of a castle captain was to be transferred from one liege to another if the was broken. *Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III, 3, 40 and 41*.

²⁸ Linton has suspected that the early successes of the rebels in 1368 were due to too sympathetic castle captains. Linton 1971, p. 52.

²⁹ Somewhat sufficient sources have survived only in Seeland.

³⁰ 21 with indication of domains, 26 lacking totally, 12 who have been titled as holding castles and 6 uncertain.

³¹ The exception to this is Claus Limbæk, the seneschal. Based on a contemporary marriage contract (*Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III. 6,166*) his yearly income from land rent has been estimated to be at least 50 *laster* of produce, while Stig Andersen (Hvide), the other party, who was one of the leading Jutish landowners, enjoyed about 75 *laster*. Ulsig 1368, p. 112. Of Klaus Limbæks holdings the castle of Kalø, which he originally held from the counts of Holstein, later from the king, must be noted.

³² Benedict Ahlefelt, had the fief of Næsbyhoved, the manors Grimstrup and Hagenskov. Albrechtsen 1981, pp. 292-293.

Lyder Limbæk held the whole Lundtoft herred as a mortgaged fief with Sogård castle as allodial property. Albrechtsen 1981, p. 306. Evert Moltke af Bjernede left to his sons the manors Farebaksholm, Bavelse and Hegnede. Ulsig 1968, p. 178. Fikke Moltke af Skafterup had his manor Skafterup and also held Vordingborg, Kalø, Randers and Nebbe castles from the king at different times. Ulsig 1968, p. 178.

³³ Linton 1971, pp. 186-190.

³⁴ Ulsig 1968, pp. 171-181. The fates of family Begere and Bent Byg demonstrate that consolidation could be equally hard for those with native ancestry. *ibid.* pp. 155-157, 167.

³⁵ Ulsig 1985, pp. 267-269

³⁶ The 1348 treaty of Nebbe, DD 3 III, 40 and 41.

³⁷ The 1353 treaty of Vindinge River, *Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III. 4, 44*.

³⁸ On alleged feuding between Claus Limbæk and Valdemar Sappi in southern Jutland see Gregersen 1974, p. 73. On indications of *folkeniser*, Fangel & Madsen 1988, p. 373.

³⁹ The Younger chronicle of Seeland in *Annales Danici Medii Ævi. II*, pp. 185-187.

⁴⁰ In 1351 there was a quarrel between the king and Claus Limbæk. The failure of the negotiations of Kalundborg made *dominus* Bugge and other rebel lords angrier than they had been before. In 1358 the king was suspected of murdering certain Jutish nobles in Middelfart, even though he swore innocence in 1359. Stig Andersen, whose son was one of the slain, refused to be pacified. *Annales Danici Medii Ævi. II* pp. 175, 182-187.

⁴¹ And even doing so formally in 1368 *Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III. 8, 130 ja 142*.

⁴² Bracke 1999, pp. 109-110.

⁴³ 1354 *Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III. 4, 131*, 1360 *Diplomatarium Danicum. Part III. 5, 325*

⁴⁴ Bracke 1999, pp. 109-110.

⁴⁵ Dahlerup 1971, p. 48.

⁴⁶ Ulsig 1368, pp. 181-188. In fact he has in his dissertation evaluated that certain knights' holdings in Lolland, of which the evidence is fragmentary, cannot have been significant *because* he was German. *Ibid.* p. 194.